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REFS: A) WHS 3001; B) SAIGON 0315; C) WHS 3002

1. I met with President Thieu at 1730 today and gave him the President's letter which he read carefully.

2. He then commented that his only real remaining problem was with the presence of North Vietnamese troops in South Viet-Nam. He conceded that the GVN is strong enough militarily to handle the NVA and that he is not concerned about the nationalists winning in an election, but the question is whether the NLF will be satisfied with obtaining representation corresponding to its percentage of the vote. If they were, there would be no problem, but if they continue to pursue their objective of gaining complete control of South Viet-Nam and renew their subversion with the support of NVA troops there will be another war.

3. The situation now, Thieu said, is that the DRV is compelled to fight on four fronts, but if there is a ceasefire and withdrawal of NVA from Laos and Cambodia and of U. S. forces from South Vietnam, there will be only one front.

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2

4. I replied that he was envisaging a situation which involved a clear violation of the agreement. He had the President's assurance, reiterated many times, that should the settlement be violated by North Viet-Nam, we will respond with full force. Not only that, he would certainly have the support of the non-communist world. It seemed to me that the great preponderance of advantage was on the side of the GVN, not only in military forces in being, but in the number of nationalists compared to the communists within South Viet-Nam. Moreover during the period since October, great progress has been made in educating the people to the problems of a political confrontation with the other side and there is far greater awareness throughout the country of what a political contest would involve. Reports received from our CORDS personnel indicate that the government educational program has been most effective.

5. The recent decree law on political parties should serve to bring about more effective political organization in the country. It is our estimate that perhaps two or three parties will result from this consolidation. It is probable that elections could not be held within six months of a ceasefire and this should permit ample time for the nationalists to be well organized before elections take place.

The principle of unanimity which applies to all actions of the NCRC puts it within the power of the GVN to insist on adequate preparation and organization of elections and to postpone them until conditions

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3

satisfactory for holding them are established.

6. Moreover, the GVN enjoys practically total support of the urban population. In the rural areas, the effects of the LTT program and the high level of farm prices have combined to create prosperity and a way of life among the rural population far more attractive than that offered by a communist collective system of farming. The Armed Forces and the civil servants and their families are another large group which solidly supports the government. The entire government apparatus remains in power until the elections.

7. Finally, I said it is clear that he and the GVN today have wider support than at any time since his election as President in 1967.

All of these factors, together with the strong support of the U. S., should enable the GVN to meet any challenge of the communists.

8. Thieu returned again to his concern that the NLF would never be satisfied with a minority position and the result would be that with the support of the NVA fighting would begin again. The problem, therefore, was to find some means by which to get the NVA troops out of South Viet-Nam. I pointed out that the agreement called for demobilization of force on both sides and if this were carried out on a one-for-one basis, the GVN would retain a great advantage. I reminded Thieu also of the President's statement to

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4

Duc that if the GVN joins the U. S. in a positive fashion, he would:

- 1) Make a statement at the time of signing that the U. S. recognizes the GVN as the only legal government in South Viet-Nam;
- 2) The U. S. does not recognize the right of any foreign troops to be present on GVN territory; 3) The U. S. will react strongly in event of violation.

9. Thieu said that, as he had written to President Nixon on December 20, in agreeing to the formula proposed for the NCRC he had made a concession which would be difficult to explain to his people. NVA troops remaining in South Viet-Nam would make it extremely difficult for him to sign an agreement ;and he hoped that Dr. Kissinger would do his best to work out some formula which would result in their eventual withdrawal.

10. I said that you would undoubtedly do your best, as you had in the past, but that as the President had stated we fear the result will be their rejection of our position. I concluded by saying that the one overriding consideration was for us to stick together; unless we do, all that we have struggled for will be lost; and that I had confidence in his ability to handle the communists.

11. Thieu was friendly and relaxed throughout our conversation and I received the distinct impression that he realizes that in the end there is really no alternative to going along with us and is trying

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5

to find a practical way of doing it, perhaps adopting one of the alternatives mentioned in Saigon 0300, paragraph 6. Of these I consider a), c) or e) or some modification of them to be the most likely.

12. Warm regards.

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